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AUTHOR Luttrell, H. Dale; And Others
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ABSTRACT

North Texas State University (NTSU) has instituted a cooperative program which allows junior level education majors to become full-time paid teacher aides in participating school districts. The students work for one semester and are closely supervised by their university supervisor. To enter the program, they must have completed a minimum of sixty-three semester hours, including a mandatory child development course. Participating students are required to enroll in a curriculum class that meets one evening a week. Most students enroll for at least one class in addition to the curriculum class. For example, ninety percent of the students participate in the Elementary Laboratory Experience class which requires a minimum of sixty hours of classroom observation. They are given credit for their experience in the classroom and can obtain an additional three hours practicum credit that can be used as an elective. In this way, they do not lose an entire semester of university credit while participating in the aide program. Most aides gain at least 700 hours of work experience. Current salaries range from $3,300 to $3,600 per semester, and it is felt that this factor makes the aide more responsible to the school, and the school more inclined to provide valid work experience. Aides may be assigned routine paper work as well as classroom responsibiities or special assignments. The aide usually reports directly to the principal, and, at the end of the program, all teachers who have worked with the aide file evaluations with the NTSU project director. These evaluations are thought to enhance the students' employment chances. (JD)

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# PAID EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCE FOR COLLEGE EDUCATION MAJORS

by

H. Dale Luttrell
Associate Professor of Education
North Texas State University

Betty O. Mason
Associate Professor of Education
North Texas State University

Watt L. Black
Professor of Education
North Texas State University

Robert K. Bane
Associate Professor of Education
North Texas State University

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Betty Mason

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# PAID EARLY FIELD EXPERIENCES FOR COLLEGE EDUCATION MAJORS

North Texas State University (NTSU) has required early field experience for Education majors for many years. However, the faculty agreed that participating students needed more direct contact with pupils in the classroom on a day-to-day basis. As a result, NTSU and surrounding school districts organized a cooperative program which allowed junior level students to become full-time paid teacher aides in surrounding districts.

## Program Description

The participating school districts agreed to make a certain number of teacher aide positions available to NTSU students. The students are paid according to the pay rate for teacher aides approved by the school districts.

One difference between NTSU aides and regular aides is regular teacher aides are hired for the entire year, while NTSU students work for only one-half year, one semester. NTSU works closely with the districts to recruit students to fill aide positions for both semesters. An important difference between

regular teacher aides and NTSU aides is that a university supervisor visits the NTSU aides. These visits do not take valuable time from the aides' duties, but provide an opportunity for the university supervisor to observe the aides in the school setting. The districts also have agreed to have the teachers who work with the aides provide a written evaluation on each aide's performance at the end of the semester.

The students who participate in the aide program have meet a number of criteria. First, they have completed a minimum of sixty-three semester hours of college credit. The minimum requirement must include a child development course. The teacher aide program is explained to the students during their enrollment in the child development class. Students who are interested in participating in the program make a formal application. They must have the recommendation of their child development professor to be considered for the program. Those who make application are interviewed by the Project Director. Students approved by the director are sent to the school districts for interviews. The districts select those students they wish to have serve as aides. The same procedure is used to replace the aides at mid-year.

In addition to serving as aides for one semester, students are required to enroll in a curriculum class. The class meets in the evening to allow the students to complete their aide duties during the day. While this is the only class in which the aides are required to enroll, they may enroll for additional

classes. However, the classes can not be taken during hours they are scheduled to work as aides. This typically means that they may not take classes which meet between the hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.

Most students enroll for at least one class in addition to the curriculum class. Ninety percent of the participants receive credit for the Elementary Laboratory Experience class which requires a minimum of sixty hours of classroom observation. This way they are given credit for their experiences. NTSU has made it possible for students to obtain an additional three hours practicum credit for the time they spend in school. The practicum credit will not substitute for a required course, but it can be used as an elective. By taking such a course the students can enroll for nine semester hours, and therefore they do not loose an entire semester of university credit while participating in the aide program. The usually graduate "on time" by attending one summer session.

As a field based experience the teacher aide program has a number of advantages over most existing pre-service programs. The aides work a full day each week day for approximately one half a school year. Most aides gain at least 700 hours of work experience. The aides are paid for their work and compensation appears to work to the advantage of the aide and the public school. The paid aide feels more responsible and the school seems more included to provide work experience. Aide salaries begin at Level 0 and differ

slightly from school system to school system. Currently salaries range from $3300 - $3600 for one semester.

The aides assume a number of duties. They, of course, are responsible for the paraprofessional jobs which relieves the regular teacher for other more professional activities. These paraprofessional duties include such responsibilities as typing, xeroxing, grading papers, collating papers, and attending to routine office functions. These responsibilities are usually handled quickly by the aide and he/she is then available for various classroom responsibilities. The aides may work with individuals, with small groups, or with large groups. Some of the more competent aides, as they gain experience, are given planning responsibilities. An aide in a program for talented and gifted recently was given the responsibility for developing a series of questions encompassing the levels of the Bloom Taxonomy. She was intrigued by the Taxonomy and developed enough questions for an entire classroom session. Special education aides frequently work with severely handicapped children and, of necessity, maintain a one to one relationship. Although the program was not designed with this in mind, some of the aides find their teaching duties to be less appealing than they anticipated and direct their professional efforts in some other direction.

Aides are assigned to areas where enrollment is excessive enough to necessitate help. The teachers being used have been outstanding professionals. Most of the teachers are so pleased

with the college aides that they request them again. Assignments are left to the school district, but some classrooms have been assigned college aides for three consecutive years. The teachers who have had aides in their classroom in previous years seem to be more knowledgeable and effective in utilization of the aides' time and talent.

The aide usually reports directly to the principal and thus makes another professional contact. At the end of the aide's work experience, all teachers who have worked with the aide and the principal, are asked to evaluate the aide. These evaluations are filed in the Project Director's office and, when the student opens a placement file in their final semester, these papers are forwarded to the Placement Office along with a cover letter explaining the nature of the Project. Each student has at least three evaluations, including the Project Director's and some have more. These evaluations enhance the students' employment chances.

Many of the pre-student teaching activities of students at NTSU are not closely supervised. The aides, however, are visited by the Project Director and by one other faculty member. The special education aides are also visited by a representative of the Special Education Division. Key contact is made each week in the evening class required of all the aides. The class is not a coffee room gossip session, but a legitimate required course offering complete with textbook, assignments, and tests. Almost any aspect of the classroom discussion may, however, be related to the classroom experiences of some member of the class. Dis-

cussions are spirited despite the 4:30 - 7:30 hour and several aides invariably remain after class to discuss situations too personal to mention in class. The Project Director teaches the class and, with an entry and exit visit to the aide's school, feels close to the student's problems.

Problems do, of course, occur. A few aides have been assigned to classroom situations where they are left with total responsibility or they have been assigned to positions where they do nothing but routine work such as paper grading. The Project Director, in these isolated cases, asks that aides not be reassigned to these classrooms. There is the constant problem of acquainting cooperating teachers with the nature of the aide program. Between the Personnel Officer, our first contact, and the classroom teacher, communication may break down. The entry visit of the Project Director is used for the purpose of orienting new cooperating teachers to the program.

Teachers have been extremely responsive to the program when they understand the rationale behind it. They are pleased to have youthful and enthusiastic pre-service professionals in their classroom.

The aides have uniformly reacted favorably to the program. One ex-aide writes:

> "At the present time, I am doing my student teaching with sixth graders at Robert E. Lee Elementary School in Dallas. I really enjoy it very much, and I feel very confident and well prepared for my student teaching mainly because of my teacher aide experience. I also continually hear good reports from other students that have participated in the program.

> For me, it was an invaluable learning experience. I was given the chance to receive "hands on" experience that I feel could not be achieved through any text, lecture, or lab classroom. I was fortunate to have several dedicated and concerned professionals who served as outstanding role models for me. I was able to participate in many aspects of education that are only discussed briefly in education courses. Testing, goal-setting, IEP planning, referrals, physical and occupational therapy, speech therapy, behavior modification programs and vision programs are a few of the many aspects of education and teaching that I was able to see in action, not just read about. I was treated as a professional and a responsible adult. I feel that I have developed my own educational philosophy and teaching strategies based on my experiences with these professionals."

The enthusiastic response of public school teachers and of the college students involved in the program indicate that this is a field-based experience that really works.